BOOKS: COMMUNICATION

What Will Become of Readers?

Michael A. Keller

So many ideas intersect in this compact book that one hardly knows which to select for comment. At the University of Pennsylvania, James O'Donnell is both professor of classical studies and vice provost for information systems and computing. From the many strands of his academic life he has woven a consideration of the "connections among speaking, writing and reading today." *Avatars of the Word* is, however, about ever so much more than those connections. The implications and importance of the book's contents are worth serious contemplation by all intellectuals—especially those who contribute to and draw from peer-reviewed scientific discourse. The threads of *Avatars* lead from Socrates and Plato; through the Alexandria and other libraries, codices, Augustine, Cassiodorus, and both old and new liberal arts; to the virtual library, hyperlinking, distance education (and other threatening attributes of the 21st-century university), and the life of the mind in cyberspace.

Avatars of the Word From Papyrus to Cyberspace.
by James J. O'Donnell
Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1998. 224 pp. $24.95. ISBN 0-674-05545-4.

The term avatar is found in tens of thousands of items on the World Wide Web. The word is generally used in information technology with the same meaning that O'Donnell intends, "in the sense of 'manifestation'—the form in which some abstract and powerful force takes palpable shape for human perception." The Oxford English Dictionary reports that the word entered English from Sanskrit for "the descent of a deity to the earth in an incarnate form," and had assumed the meaning used by O'Donnell by 1850. What a powerful idea the word conveys in this era of so many accessible means of global communication.

To supplement the book, O'Donnell provides its own avatar at http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/avatars and references numerous other URLs. The book itself is incomplete without reference to many of these resources and their hyperlinks. And so it becomes a model of its own main theme.

O'Donnell does not lead one through the histories of writing, literacy, or communication. Readers are thereby spared the usual recitation of the historiography of prominent notions that mark many academic books. Many readers of *Science*, however, consequently may miss discovering that the ancillary sciences of history (among them epigraphy, paleography, and diplomatics) are in fact scientific and that many of the objects studied in such fields have transmitted the ideas and fundamental concepts of science itself from early antiquity to the present day. Although works such as Felix Reichmann's *Sources of Western Literacy: the Middle Eastern Civilizations* (*1*) are also beyond the scope of O'Donnell's bibliography, they certainly complement the ones cited in the brief but excellent bibliographic notes at the end of the book.

These days scientists and other scholars, librarians and other information professionals, and policymakers of assorted stripes are investing time, energy, and money to promote the useful arts and sciences. Among the numerous tasks and processes they support are modes of communication; the work of librarians, archivists, and museum curators; and the component duties of authors, editors, and publishers. O'Donnell interweaves his examination of these topics with excursions. He considers the instability of text in cyberspace and its implications; nonlinear reading focused on the organization and management of knowledge (although he does not deal with collaborative work in the creation of scholarly reports and records); the distribution of scholarly information through the Web and the challenge of such dissemination to intellectual property laws; and the force of personalities in the teaching process and, by implication, in the research process. The cautious (Sven Birkerts) as well as the reactionary or superficial (Allan Bloom, Charles Sykes, Roger Kimball, Page Smith, Dinesh D'Souza, and David Samrosch) are dispatched with grace in order to comment critically and, in my view, accurately on the state and the possibilities of the university (including the possibilities affected by information technology).

Elsewhere O'Donnell has remarked, "Universities are triumphant testimony that technologies rarely supplant one another" (*2*). This notion is reflected in the book and is fodder for rich debates, especially from the perspectives of scientists, technologists, and medical researchers. I predict that when, after a century, others look back at this period of transition, our era will be recognized for the amazing transformation of scholarly communication that occurred because of networks of computers and the prescient thinking and actions of a few editors and publishers. Despite its context deep in the humanities, O'Donnell's *Avatars of the Word* is a book for those pondering the nature of communication—in research, in teaching, and in life.

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References
1. F. Reichmann, *Sources of Western Literacy: the Middle Eastern Civilizations* (Greenwood, Westport, CT, 1980).
2. J. J. O'Donnell, *Chron. Higher Educ.* **44**, B7 (13 Feb. 1998).

BOOKS: ANTHROPOLOGY

Mead Misrepresented

Martin Orans

Casting himself as the Kenneth Starr of anthropology, Derek Freeman claims to have found "the smoking gun" in a crime of misrepresentation committed by Margaret Mead. He identifies a letter written by Mead to her mentor Franz Boas as the smoking gun. Freeman says this letter corroborates his interpretation that Mead was hoaxed by two Samoan women into believing Samoa was a promiscuous society that "did not attempt to curb the sexual activity of adolescents." The alleged crime is that Mead made such an assertion in her book *Coming of Age in Samoa* (*1*) and elsewhere.

The Fateful Hoaxing of Margaret Mead
A Historical Analysis of Her Samoan Research
by Derek Freeman
Westview (Perseus), Boulder, CO, 1998. 291 pp. $24, C$34. ISBN 0-8133-3560-4.

The alleged crime never took place. Mead's generalizations and evocative descriptions certainly leave one with an impression of more permissive female adolescent sexuality than actually existed or is consistent with her detailed statements (*2*, chapter 4). But offering this impression is the extent of her misdoing. In *Coming of Age*, Mead specifically excludes from sexual freedom the taupou (holders of a title given to virgins), those of "noble birth," young adolescent girls, and those living with a pastor's family or in a church school.

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Because every Samoan girl is genealogically linked to titled people, all might be regarded as "noble," though clearly some are more "noble" than others. The effect of the age restriction is a median age of 18 years for females at the time of their first heterosexual experience (*2*, pp. 78–79). Nowhere has Freeman acknowledged the limitations on sexual freedom reported by Mead, and his current work compounds this misrepresentation.

In Freeman's first publication of evidence for a hoax (*3*), he claimed that two women in their mid-20s, Fa'apua'a Fa'amu and Fofoa, jokingly misinformed Mead regarding Samoan sexuality. This evidence had surfaced when Fa'apua'a Fa'amu was interviewed by Galea'i Poumele (then secretary for Samoan Affairs of American Samoa, and the son of the deceased Fofoa). The 1987 conversation was filmed, and parts were included in Frank Heimans' documentary *Margaret Mead and Samoa* (1988).

The sum and substance of Fa'apua'a's testimony was that she and Fofoa jokingly told Mead that they spent their "nights with boys, yes, with boys!" Freeman has never made clear how this scanty tidbit regarding the behavior of grown women could have anything to do with Mead's claims about female adolescents. Further interviews of Fa'pua'a were conducted by Unasa Leulu Felise Va'a, then a doctoral candidate at Australian National University. Freeman notes that Va'a interviewed Fa'apua'a for six hours in 1989 and "put to her over 250 questions." Surprisingly, Freeman does not provide any of these questions, nor any of Fa'apua'a's answers. All one is offered is her remark to the effect that scientists should be careful and not taken in by jokes, and some phrases meant to indicate that her memory was still quite sharp.

Freeman contends that Fa'apua'a also joked about the sex lives of female adolescents, although he offers no evidence for this claim. If, however, such joking about Fa'apua'a's sex life did occur, Mead certainly did not believe it; for Fa'apua'a was a taupou, and Mead noted that the taupou's virtue is carefully protected and excluded from "free and easy experimentation" (*1*). Furthermore, the alleged fibs are completely inconsistent with the nuanced restrictions described by Mead in *Coming of Age*. And though Mead's field research materials identify many of her informants, never are Fa'apua'a or Fofoa so cited, nor does anything in these materials correspond with their alleged untruths.

Many Samoans believe Mead portrayed their society as sexually loose, and they take strong exception to this characterization. Surely the claim of hoaxing Mead must be evaluated with this motive for discrediting her in mind, but Freeman never mentions it.

As for the smoking gun, Mead's letter to Boas of 14 March, 1926, Freeman totally distorts Mead's claim regarding constraints on adolescent female sexuality. He repeatedly ignores the wording in the letter, which states that "it is the family and not the community (except in the case of the taupou) which attempts to preserve a girl's virginity…" (p. 231). In the first two instances (pp. 142 and 143), he leaves out the word "family." Subsequently, the word "community" also disappears and one reads only "no curb" (pp. 149, 158, 175, and 186). Mead's contention that families, rather than the community, seek to curb the sexual lives of female adolescents is correct, if one understands the community to be represented by meetings (fono) of the titled members (matai) of a village.

Merry companions. Margaret Mead and two women in Manu'a, American Samoa, in 1926. Each is dressed in "fine mats" appropriate for a taupou (ceremonial virgin).

Although the 14 March letter says nothing substantially different from what Mead had said prior to the alleged hoaxing (*2*, pp. 96–97), Freeman still finds it corroborates hoaxing—on the grounds that Mead had previously lacked evidence regarding female adolescent sexuality. But examining Mead's field materials demonstrates that she had already obtained considerable relevant evidence (*2*, pp. 33–73).

Finally, Freeman sees smoke in the 14 March letter because it was written the day after the alleged hoaxing. But Freeman's former student Va'a has said that the hoaxing took place over a long period of time, not all at once (*4*). Furthermore, Freeman has never provided the data that would allow one to judge whether Fa'apua'a produced a particular date spontaneously or only after prompting.

The remainder of Freeman's book deals principally with the influence of Mead's mentor, Franz Boas. Freeman claims that Boas was a life long "neo-Kantian idealist" and that he passed on this view to Ruth Benedict and Mead. This philosophical position, Freeman argues, underlies Boas' alleged opposition to evolution and biology as influencing human behavior, and was the basis of Mead's pro-cultural, anti-biological bias.

Freeman's characterization of Boas's views on biology, behavior, culture, and evolution is demonstrably false. In this very journal in 1931 Boas contended, "There is no doubt in my mind that there is a very definite association between the biological make-up of the individual and the physiological and psychological functioning of his body. The claim that only social and other environmental conditions determine the reactions of the individual disregards the most elementary observations" (*5*, p. 4). Referring to 19th-century advances in understanding biological evolution, Boas says these problems "received an entirely new stimulus when Darwin's views of the instability of species were accepted by the scientific world" (*6*, p. 605). Clearly, Freeman's view of Boas is, if anything, even less reliable than his account of Mead. Perhaps he has confused Boas's opposition to unilineal cultural evolution with an opposition to biological evolution.

In separate articles in a recent issue of *Skeptical Inquirer*, Paul Shankman and James Côté indicate that Freeman's characterization of Mead's views on behavior and biology is also biased (*7*). Though I sympathize with Freeman's effort to encourage greater concern for the complex interaction between biology and behavior, it is a shame that his vehicle, *Fateful Hoaxing*, rides roughshod over the evidence. As for his misunderstanding of my work, I leave it to readers to judge that for themselves.

References

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2. Martin Orans, *Not Even Wrong: Margaret Mead, Derek Freeman, and the Samoans* (Chandler and Sharp, Novato, CA, 1996).
3. Derek Freeman, *Am. Anthropol.* **91**, 1017 (1989).
4. Leulu Felise Va'a, *Samoa Times* 21 May 1993, p. 1.
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6. _____, *ibid.* **76**, 605 (1932).
7. P. Shankman, *Skeptical Inquirer* **22**(6), 35 (1998); J. E. Côté, *ibid.*, p. 29.